

BLIZZARD OF '49, WYOMING PUBLIC TELEVISION ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

Elaine: My name is Elaine Crummer. During the blizzard of '49, I lived 45 miles north of Douglas on the Hornbuckle Ranch.

Speaker 2: Was this a big cattle ranch?

Elaine: It was a pretty good sized cattle ranch, yes.

Speaker 2: What were your experiences during this blizzard.

Elaine: You talked about shoveling snow. I don't think I ever wanted to shovel snow like that again. It drifted so badly that we would have to shovel out every door that we entered. The barn doors, the house door, all of those we would have to shovel out every morning and then every evening. When we did the chores we had to shovel them out.

Speaker 2: Because it drifted right back?

Elaine: Yeah, they drifted right back. That was for weeks it seemed like. Well, it was for weeks.

Speaker 2: How old were you at that time? This is when you were on the ranch.

Elaine: I was 12 then.

Speaker 2: Did you have a lot of responsibilities?

Elaine: Yes. I helped take care of the livestock and I tried real hard to keep the doors to the house shoveled out because my mother was crippled and I tried to make it easy for her to walk through.

Speaker 2: Was it a big operation? Did you have a lot of livestock?

Elaine: Well, fortunately my father had sold down. I don't remember his reasons, but he had sold down part of his cattle. That made it wasn't as many to take care of, [00:02:00] it was still enough. A lot of work.

Speaker 2: Did you lose any because of the blizzard?

Elaine: Everybody lost some, but we were relatively light on our losses.

Speaker 2: What happens when you do lose cattle? They have to be just disposed of or were you able to skin them and save the hides? How did that work?

Elaine: A lot of them just were left to lay because they immediately froze down. You did your clean up later on.

Speaker 2: I'm trying to think of the rest of your interview here. You're talking about rigging the calves down for pasture.

Elaine: The calves had been put in a separate pasture after they were weened, and usually it was the pasture that we usually wintered calves in, but when the blizzard started and the snow was starting to swirl you couldn't see through it, my dad decided we'd better go get the calves down from that. They trailed them down and it was so dark that one of them would drive the pick up and the other would walk in front in the headlights to make sure that we had the calves in front of us. I wasn't privileged to go on my trip. Dad said that was a little bit too much for me. He and my brother brought the calves down.

Speaker 2: Are you saying it was so dark? [00:04:00] Was it daytime?

Elaine: It was daytime, but it was just snowing so hard and so thick and the wind was blowing it too. We could see through it but it wasn't comfortable.

Speaker 2: I've heard a lot of reports about people said that they heard thunder and lightning during the storm. Did you experience any of that?

Elaine: No, we didn't. We didn't have any of that.

Speaker 2: I also heard reports about people having problems with static electricity, being really static-y. No?

Elaine: No, we didn't. I guess I didn't. We weren't any place that it was going on.

Speaker 2: Were you pretty much snowbound at your ranch then during the blizzard?

Elaine: Yes, we were. We were snowed in. My mother kept the records of the snow through the whole thing and we were snowed in 9 weeks before anybody could go get out of there. My dad was an old timer there and he knew a different route kind of going through the pastures, and we had to take that way into town. No one stayed very long in town and got back just as soon as you could because the road would be filled in and almost impassable.

Speaker 2: The town you're referring to is you came into Douglas?

Elaine: Into Douglas, yes.

Speaker 2: How far was that?

Elaine: 45 miles.

Speaker 2: How long would an excursion like that take during all these drifts?

Elaine: Sometimes up to three days for us to get home.

Speaker 2: If it took you three days to get home [00:06:00] what were you doing. You mean you had to wait in Douglas until it cleared out a little bit?

Elaine: No. We had started back. Well, they did their shopping. Some supplies. They did their shopping and then they started home. Sometimes you would spend the whole night shoveling going just a little bit at a time as you shoveled it out.

Speaker 2: You said that you were snowed in for 9 weeks.

Elaine: Yes, sir.

Speaker 2: Did you mom do a lot of canning? Did you have a lot of supplies on hand?

Elaine: Well, the folks knew that they were distant and it was bad country for snow. They usually put in a pretty good supply of groceries in the stables and things that they thought we would need to get through the winter both for the livestock and for themselves.

Speaker 2: You made it through pretty much okay. You didn't have to get any assistance then from food drops or anything from the Air Force or anything like that?

Elaine: No, we didn't have that.

Speaker 2: What about neighboring ranches? Were they in as rough a shape or worse shape than you guys were maybe?

Elaine: I don't know. The communications weren't good, so I don't know about the surrounding ranches. I don't think it was easy for them though.

Speaker 2: Did you have electricity or phone service?

Elaine: We didn't have a phone, and just shortly before then we had put in a light plant because the power didn't go out that way. My daddy put in a light plant so we did have some electricity.

Speaker 2: When you say light plant, what is light plant? Like a windmill and battery storage? [00:08:00]

Elaine: It was a big motor and battery storage.

Speaker 2: Did you have a radio?

Elaine: Yes, we had radio and usually it was pretty easy to hear.

Speaker 2: You were tuned into a station in Casper maybe?

Elaine: Yes, there was a station in Casper.

Speaker 2: Were they giving weather reports? Was there a lot of activity on the air about what's going on with the blizzard?

Elaine: Yes, they gave reports. I know my dad would try to be by the radio when the weather reports came.

Speaker 2: Because they sure blew the first one.

Elaine: Yes. Yes, they did.

Speaker 2: Anything else? I'm trying to think. Oh, you were talking about sheep drifting into fence corners.

Elaine: Yes. We didn't have sheep, but some of the ranchers did and when the storm started the sheep will drift in the direction that it's blowing. Then when they come to a fenced in corner they wouldn't go around. They'd just pile up there. In the fence corners there was piles of sheep that was on one side of us. It was very sad. They were helpless.

Speaker 2: Your ranch house, were you guys pretty snug and tight in your ranch house in the blizzard?

Elaine: Pretty well, yeah.

Speaker 2: What did you use for heat? [00:10:00]

Elaine: At that time we had an oil stove.

Speaker 2: You had plenty of oil in storage?

Elaine: Yes. That was one thing that my dad was going after when he went to town for the first time.

Speaker 2: Was?

Elaine: To get the oil.

Speaker 2: I've heard reports of people's attics getting drifted with snow. You didn't experience that?

Elaine: No, we didn't have that.

Speaker 2: Was your house a one level house?

Elaine: Yes, it was.

Speaker 2: You could keep it quite warm then and you were fairly comfortable.

Elaine: Yes, we were fairly. It was so cold I don't think anybody was the most comfortable because it just was that cold. It was hard to heat against.

Speaker 2: Did you have siblings? You said you had a brother?

Elaine: I had a twin sister and my brother was 8 years older than I.

Speaker 2: You all had your chores. Did you have to get out to the barn during the blizzard?

Elaine: Oh, yes. That's the part of the doors I dug out everyday.

Speaker 2: Was it bad enough to have to string rope or something? Were you ever concerned about getting lost? You said it was blowing so hard you couldn't see very well.

Elaine: As far as around the buildings, you're so familiar with it, but it was a little easier to see right in there. The places you couldn't see when you were trying travel would be on the hills and rises. Yeah. [00:12:00]

Speaker 2: When this was all over, I guess getting towards the end of February, did you guys have assistance digging out? Did the Army come in with plows?

Elaine: Oh, no. No we didn't have any help. We did it all ourselves.

Speaker 2: Did your dad use some of the farm machinery to plow?

Elaine: No. We didn't have much in farm machinery. Mostly horses. We did have pickups that we fed with when we could get them through.

Speaker 2: Your ranch house was kind of set back from a county road?

Elaine: Yes. We were about six miles from the county road.

Speaker 2: How did you get out for your pickups? The drifts must have been ...

Elaine: They were bad. Some of them dad knew where to go around because there'd be places where they were blown free.

Speaker 3: If you want that do it over.

Speaker 2: Okay. Can you repeat that again how you got out. You hit the mic with your hand.

Elaine: Oh, I'm sorry.

Speaker 2: That's okay. No problem. We'll just let it roll. Just talk about that again how you finally got out at the end of the storm.

Elaine: Yes. We finally got out by going in the pickups and dad knew how to go around the drifts and the places that were better to travel. If it was one that was full of snow and you'd get stuck he knew more about them.

Speaker 2: When you finally got to the county road, had they finally been plowed by the county or the Army? Do you recall that?

Elaine: They were plowed by the county and it took them several days to open a road because they had all the [00:14:00] drifts. The county road north, we were more sparsely settled and they didn't do ours first. We were a while before we could get out.

Speaker 2: Do you recollect any air drops at all? I know they were dropping hay into some ranchers that needed supplies. Did you hear about that or see any of the Army?

Elaine: We would hear about it. We'd hear about in Utah they dropped a lot of hay. Not a lot around here I don't think, at least I didn't see them anyway.

Speaker 2: You didn't see a lot of Army vehicles around this? The Army I know came in with their own bulldozers and they also hired people with bulldozers to supplement what the counties were doing because there was just so much. But you didn't see any real military looking vehicles then?

Elaine: No, I didn't. We were mostly our own ranch vehicles.

Speaker 2: I'm going to ask you again. You've seen a lot of winters. How did that one compare to the rest of the winters you've seen?

Elaine: That one is beyond compare. I think that was the worst I've ever seen. I've seen some blizzards and fought getting home in those blizzards, but they were never that cold. I think the cold was what defeated so many people. Trying to get anywhere or the livestock trying to live, the cold was just colossal.

Speaker 2: I've seen pictures of animals frozen standing up. [00:16:00]

Elaine: That's right.

Speaker 2: Shoveling snow, you never want to shovel any more snow.

Elaine: I'd rather not. I did my share.

Speaker 2: Yeah. Anything else? Did you sense the fact that people were helping each other out a lot? You were so isolated there. You probably didn't have a lot of exterior communication.

Elaine: We had one close neighbor and he did go with dad when they busted out finally, but I didn't see much of that because we just didn't have the people around us. We were pretty isolated.

Speaker 2: You hadn't heard of many fatalities then either due to the storm?

Elaine: Oh, yes. We heard of a few, but we didn't know if it was true.

Speaker 2: Mostly people that were stranded in their cars died?

Elaine: Not in our area. We just didn't have that many people and they didn't get out. They couldn't get their cars out. They couldn't get out. We didn't have anything like that, but we did hear of some in larger places.

Speaker 2: Anything else, Elaine?

Elaine: I don't think of anything else except I'd like to repeat again how long we were snowed in. My mother kept track of it. That was nine weeks.

Speaker 2: You still have those diaries?

Elaine: No. [00:18:00] She threw it away after she showed it to dad and so forth.

Speaker 2: That's too bad.

Elaine: Yeah. You don't think about that being something that's going to be in history later on. You don't think about that, especially when you're 12 years old. Just sigh relief that you get a little reprieve now and then.

Speaker 2: I know ranch kids have a lot of responsibilities, but did you also take some time to play in the snow?

Elaine: It was too cold. Too cold. It was all we could take to do our chores in that snow.

Speaker 2: I've heard stories of kids sliding down drifts opening up their bedroom windows, sliding down drifts from your house and such.

Elaine: Yes. I'm sure if our house has been where there was drifted like that we may have been doing that, but nobody had much time to play. It was just too cold. Elements, you didn't care about playing. You didn't have time and you were too tired.

Speaker 2: When you were out in it, you must have really had to bundle up.

Elaine: Everything you owned. Yeah.

Speaker 2: Layers and layers of clothing.

Elaine: Yeah, several layers.

Speaker 2: What about protecting your face?

Elaine: Well, I'd throw a scarf up around my face.

Speaker 2: Good. Nothing else. That's it. Memory drained.

Elaine: I think so.

Speaker 2: Thanks so [00:20:00] much.

Elaine: You bet.

Speaker 2: Good?